

**TECHNICAL REPORT
NATICK/SP-17/001**



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SOLDIER QUALITY OF LIFE (OPERATIONAL) AND READINESS AT CONTINGENCY BASE CAMPS: INSIGHTS FROM QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

**by
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Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited

**U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center
Natick, Massachusetts 01760-5020**

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14. ABSTRACT This report describes the results of a qualitative research study on the relationship between expeditionary base camp capabilities and Soldier readiness. Base camps provide an essential platform for restoring and sustaining readiness during extended operations. However, the Army lacks data on the specific base camp capabilities that keep Soldiers ready across cognitive, physical, social, and emotional (CPSE) domains. To address this gap, the research team interviewed 31 active duty Soldiers from Fort Drum, NY and Fort Bliss, TX. A majority of the Soldiers had deployed overseas within the past four years and primarily lived on base camps housing fewer than 1000 personnel during their most recent deployment. During the interviews, Soldiers first provided detailed descriptions of the camp capabilities and conditions they experienced while deployed. They were then asked to identify instances in which camp conditions led to impacts on their CPSE readiness domains. Soldiers rated each impact as mild, moderate, or severe, and placed index cards on a visual deployment timeline to indicate when each impact occurred. Data were coded and analyzed to identify the key connections between camp conditions and Soldier readiness. Results indicated that camp capabilities (and the lack thereof) have a profound effect on Soldiers. In particular, emotional state and social factors (e.g. group cohesion) can become compromised during extended deployments to austere base camps. Insights gained from this work can inform the development of base camp doctrine and materiel system design. In addition, these data are guiding the development of a model that illustrates the links between base camp capabilities and readiness.						
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MOOD	STRESSORS	ARMY PERSONNEL	CONTINGENCY BASES			
COPING	BASE CAMPS	MENTAL HEALTH	SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY			
MORALE	INTERVIEWS	GROUP DYNAMICS	QOL(QUALITY OF LIFE)			
SURVEYS	CAPABILITIES	DATA COLLECTION	SOLDIER PERFORMANCE			
COHESION	DEPLOYMENT	LIVING CONDITIONS	OPERATIONAL READINESS			
COGNITION	SUSTAINABILITY	MENTAL READINESS	EXPEDITIONARY OPERATIONS			
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Soldier Quality of Life (Operational) and Readiness at Contingency Base Camps: Insights from Qualitative Interviews

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Terms of Reference



Definition of terms used throughout this report:

Readiness	The ability and willingness to perform an assigned task or mission. (Army Ready and Resilient Campaign)
Impact	Any thoughts, actions, or conditions that limit a Soldier's ability and/or willingness to perform an assigned task or mission.
Cognitive	Anything having to do with paying attention, understanding situations, remembering information, making judgments, decision-making, and other mental tasks.
Physical	Anything having to do with physical performance (strength, endurance, agility) and well-being.
Social	Anything having to do with interacting with other people, including fellow Soldiers, local nationals, civilians, etc.
Emotional	Anything having to do with managing your emotions, handling stress, and sustaining emotional well-being
Mild	Minimal to no impact on readiness or mission performance.
Moderate	Some impact on readiness/mission performance.
Severe	Readiness is at risk and some intervention is required.



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Executive Summary



- From July to August 2015, the Quality of Life (Operational) (QoL (O)) team conducted qualitative interviews with Soldiers at Fort Bliss, TX and Fort Drum, NY in support of the Sustainability/Logistics-Basing Science and Technology Objective – Demonstration (SLB-STO-D).
- The purpose of these interviews was to begin identifying relationships between QoL (O) at austere base camps and Soldier/small unit readiness to guide the development of a quantitative readiness survey.
- During structured interviews, 31 Soldiers discussed their experiences with how base camp conditions can lead to degradations in individual and collective readiness.
- Readiness was separated into four domains adapted from the Army Human Dimension Strategy: Cognitive, Physical, Social, and Emotional (CPSE). Soldiers also rated the severity of each impact as mild, moderate, or severe.
- Data were coded and analyzed to identify the primary connections between camp conditions and Soldier readiness.



Executive Summary



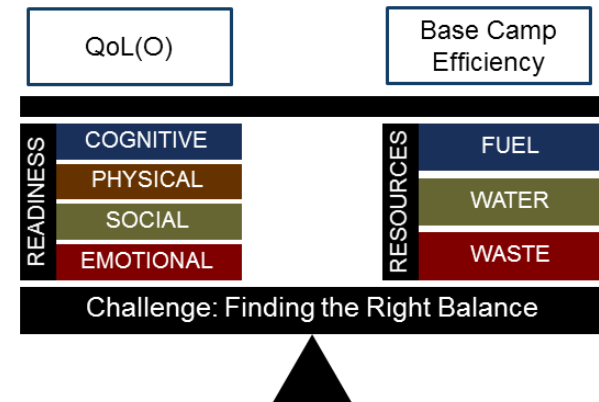
Key Findings

- Results indicated that the majority of impacts on readiness were associated with the social and emotional domains.
- Impacts were also linked with specific base camp functional areas. MWR conditions had the greatest effect on readiness, followed by billets, field feeding, and field hygiene.



Key Findings

- Analysis also indicated that camps can sustain readiness through three key capabilities:
 - Providing variety as a temporary relief from mission stress or to break up monotony.
 - Protecting the ability of Soldiers to reconnect: with themselves, their fellow Soldiers, loved ones, and the world (outside of their area of operation).
 - Ensuring optimal conditions for rest, nutrition, and spiritual and psychological support.





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Background



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What is the Challenge?

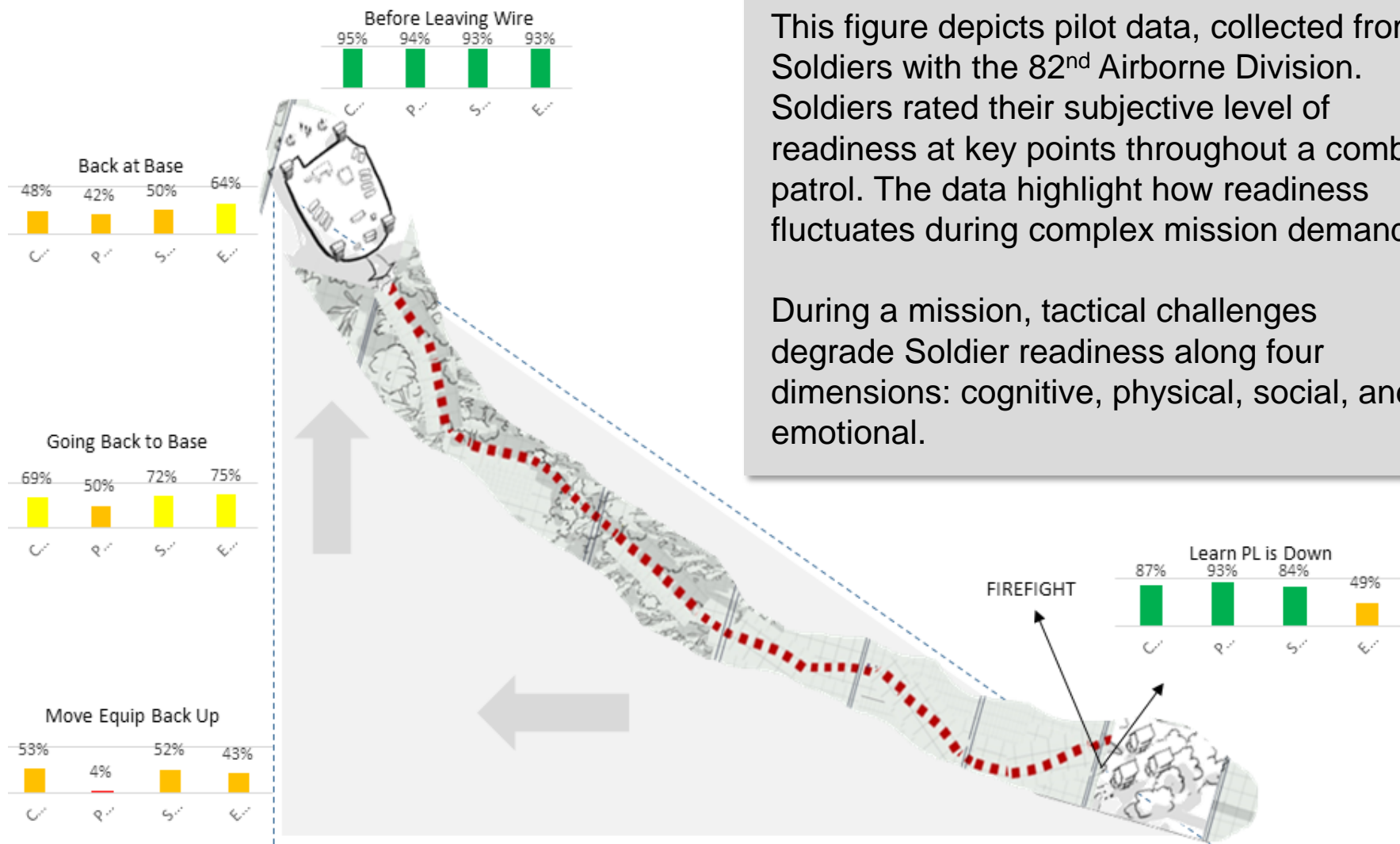


“When you're on patrol you've gotta think 24/7... you're being mentally drained while you're outside the wire, and when you come in [to the camp] you want the Soldier to be able to decompress...”

“When you are mentally draining them because the facilities suck, they can't go anywhere, the base is really not safe even if it is the base, all of that stuff mentally draining them, they may not be able to react as fast or see something out of the ordinary or catch it as quick.”

-- First Lieutenant (Infantry), Fort Bliss

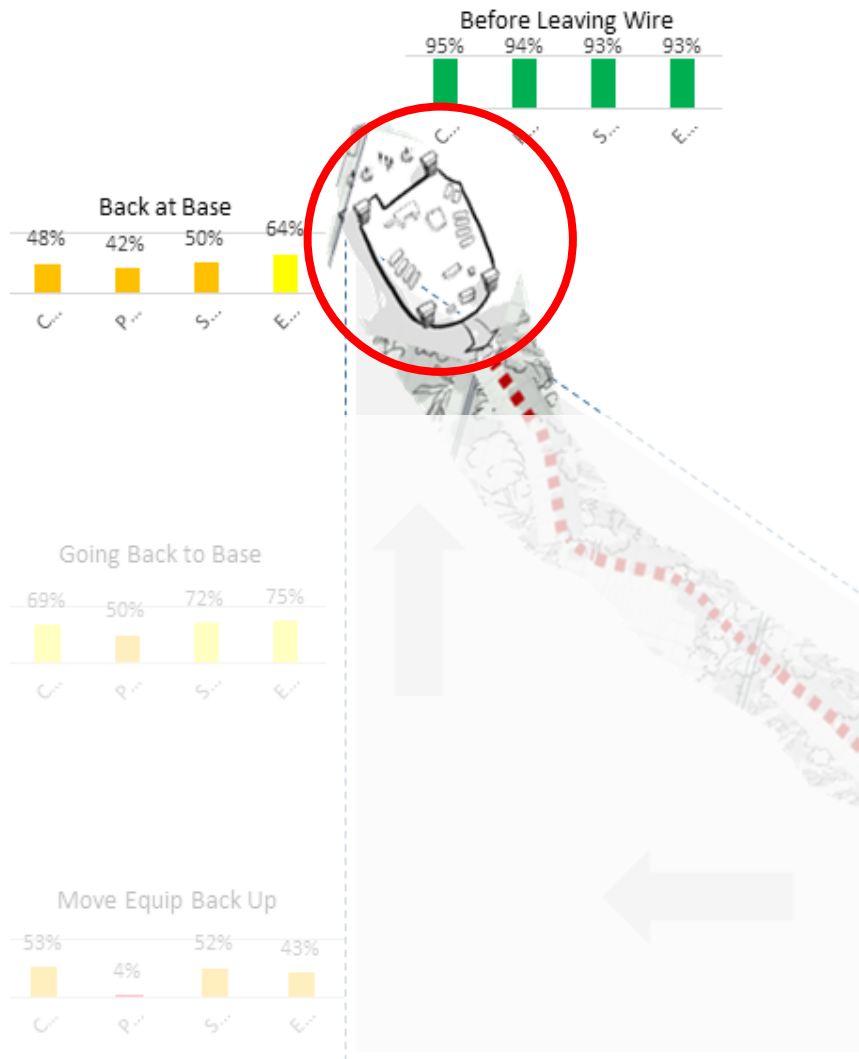
What is the Challenge?



This figure depicts pilot data, collected from Soldiers with the 82nd Airborne Division. Soldiers rated their subjective level of readiness at key points throughout a combat patrol. The data highlight how readiness fluctuates during complex mission demands.

During a mission, tactical challenges degrade Soldier readiness along four dimensions: cognitive, physical, social, and emotional.

What is the Challenge?



Expeditionary base camps are the essential platform for restoring and sustaining Soldier readiness.

Camps have multiple capabilities that can enable readiness through sleep, nutrition, and restorative activities.



Billets drive sleep quality



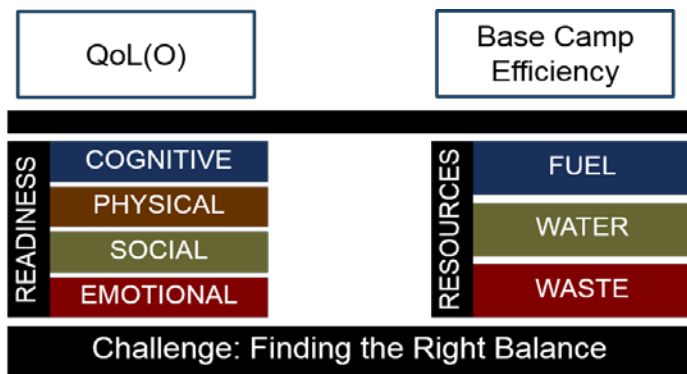
Field feeding drives nutrition



Hygiene and MWR drive activities that restore readiness



What is the Challenge?



Leaders must often make tradeoffs between quality of life conditions that could enhance readiness, and constraints on fuel, water, waste, and other sustainment considerations.

The Army lacks data on how camp conditions influence Soldier readiness, and on which base camp capabilities provide the greatest positive impacts on readiness.

Without these data, it is difficult to make informed, metric-based decisions about sustainment tradeoffs.





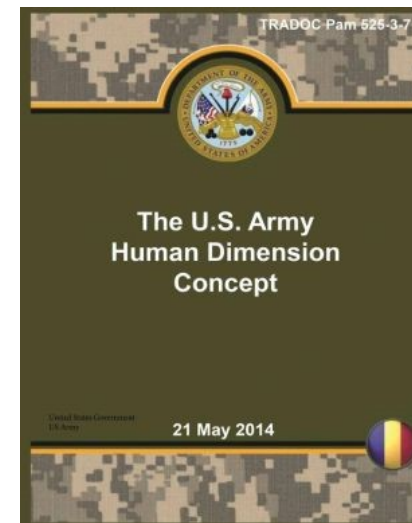
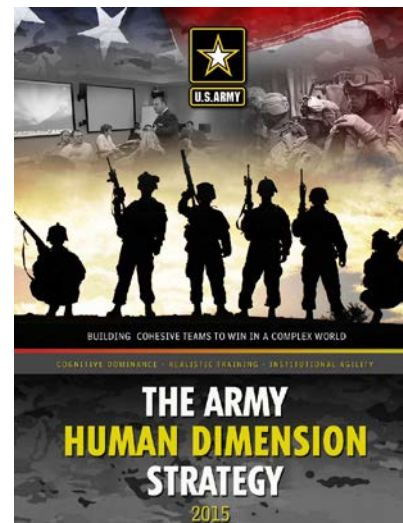
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Connection to the Human Dimension



“Through investment in its human capital, the Army can maintain the decisive edge in the **human dimension** – the **cognitive, physical, and social components of the Army’s trusted professionals and teams.**”

ATP 3-37.10 MCRP 3-40D.13
BASE CAMPS
[Pending Date]
<small>DISTRIBUTION: Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited. *This publication supersedes ATP 3-37.10/MCRP 3-17.7N, 26 April 2013.</small>
HEADQUARTERS, DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY



“CCDRs establish theater base camp standards that are tailored for the joint operations area that provides guidance on facility allowances and standards for construction, **quality of life (QoL)**, design, environmental, and force protection issues.”



What Did We Do?



Conducted qualitative interviews with Soldiers to begin identifying relationships between QoL (O) at austere base camps and Soldier/small unit readiness to guide the development of a quantitative readiness survey.

“When you're on patrol you've gotta think 24/7... you're being mentally drained while you're outside the wire, and when you come in [to the camp] you want the Soldier to be able to decompress...”



Click to hear quote





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Methods



Participants



- A total of 31 Soldiers (male and female) were interviewed in small groups.
- Most of the Soldiers held an MOS of 11B (n=14) or 11A (n=8).
- The majority of Soldiers lived on base camps in Afghanistan ranging in size from 20 to 1000 personnel. They rated these camps as having average QoL (O) on a worst to best scale.
- The majority of Soldiers were deployed during 2011 and 2014.



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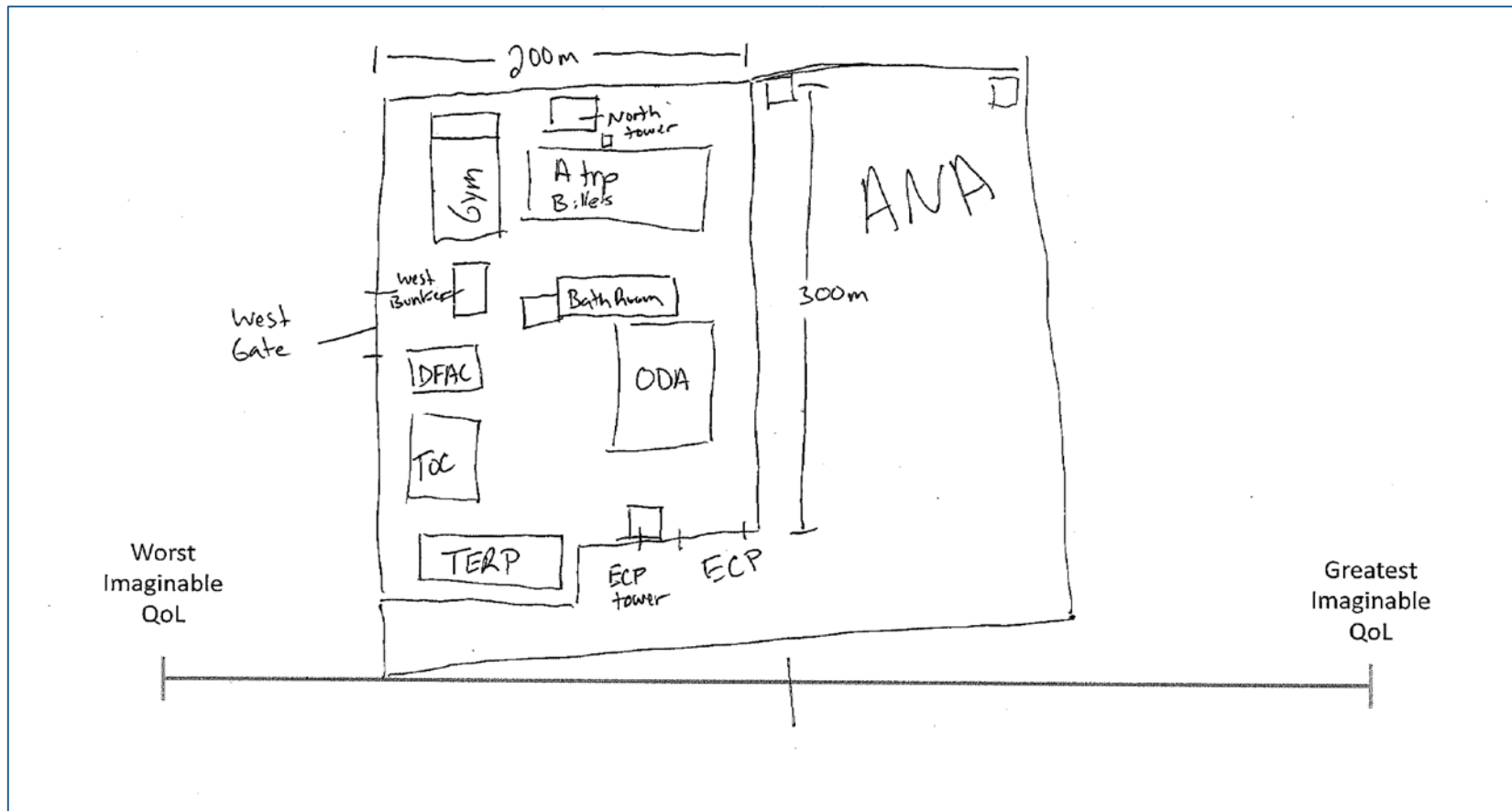
Procedure



Interviews were divided into two parts:

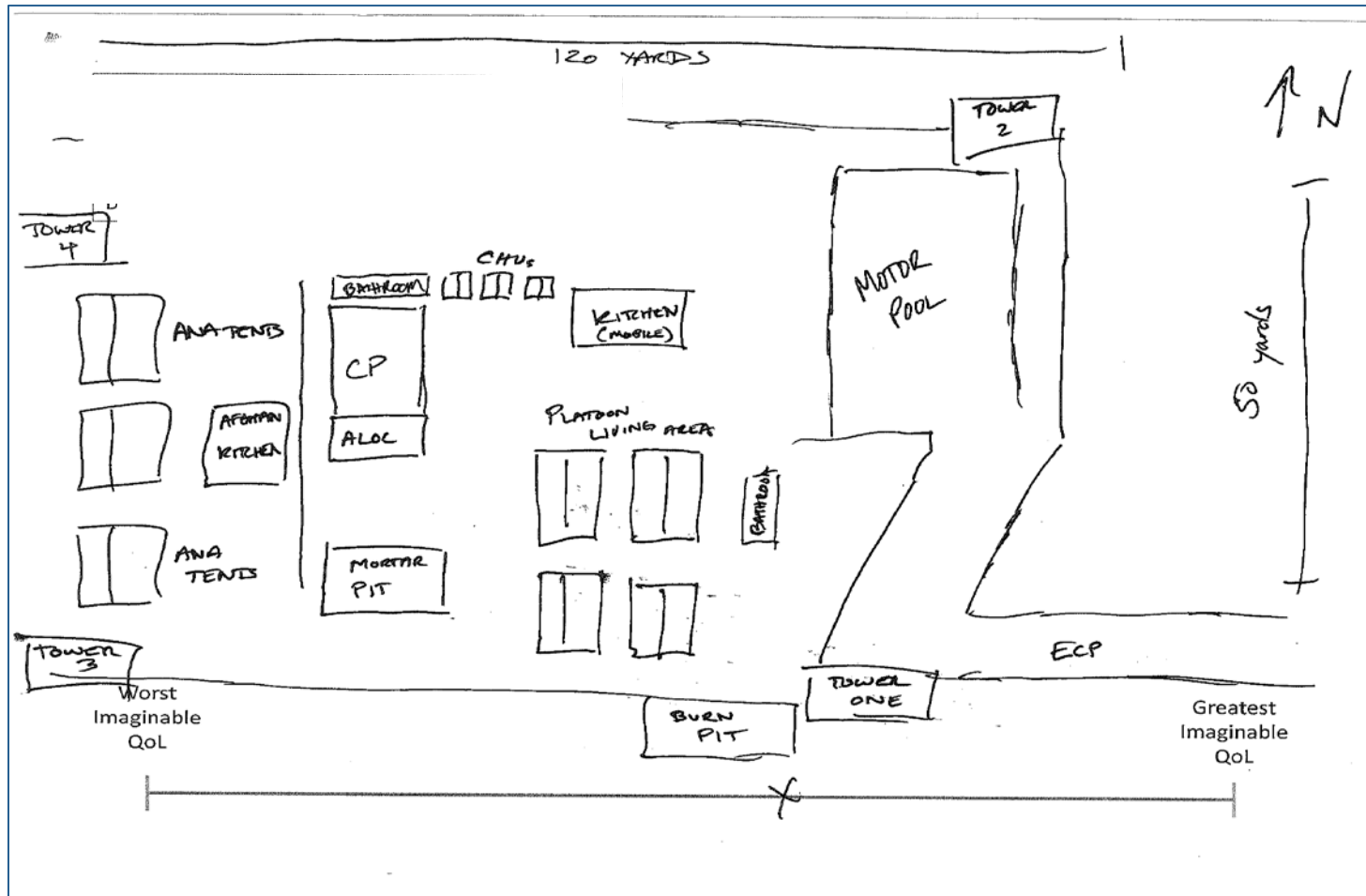
Part 1:

- Soldiers sketched the layout of the camp they spent the most time at during their most recent deployment.
- The interviewers then led them through a series of questions that built up a description of camp conditions related to billeting, field feeding, field hygiene, and MWR.
- The primary function of the sketch and camp description was to help the Soldiers remember the camp and “re-immense” them in the conditions they had experienced.



Example Camp Sketch: Afghanistan, 160 pax

Procedure



Example Camp Sketch: Afghanistan, 60-80 pax



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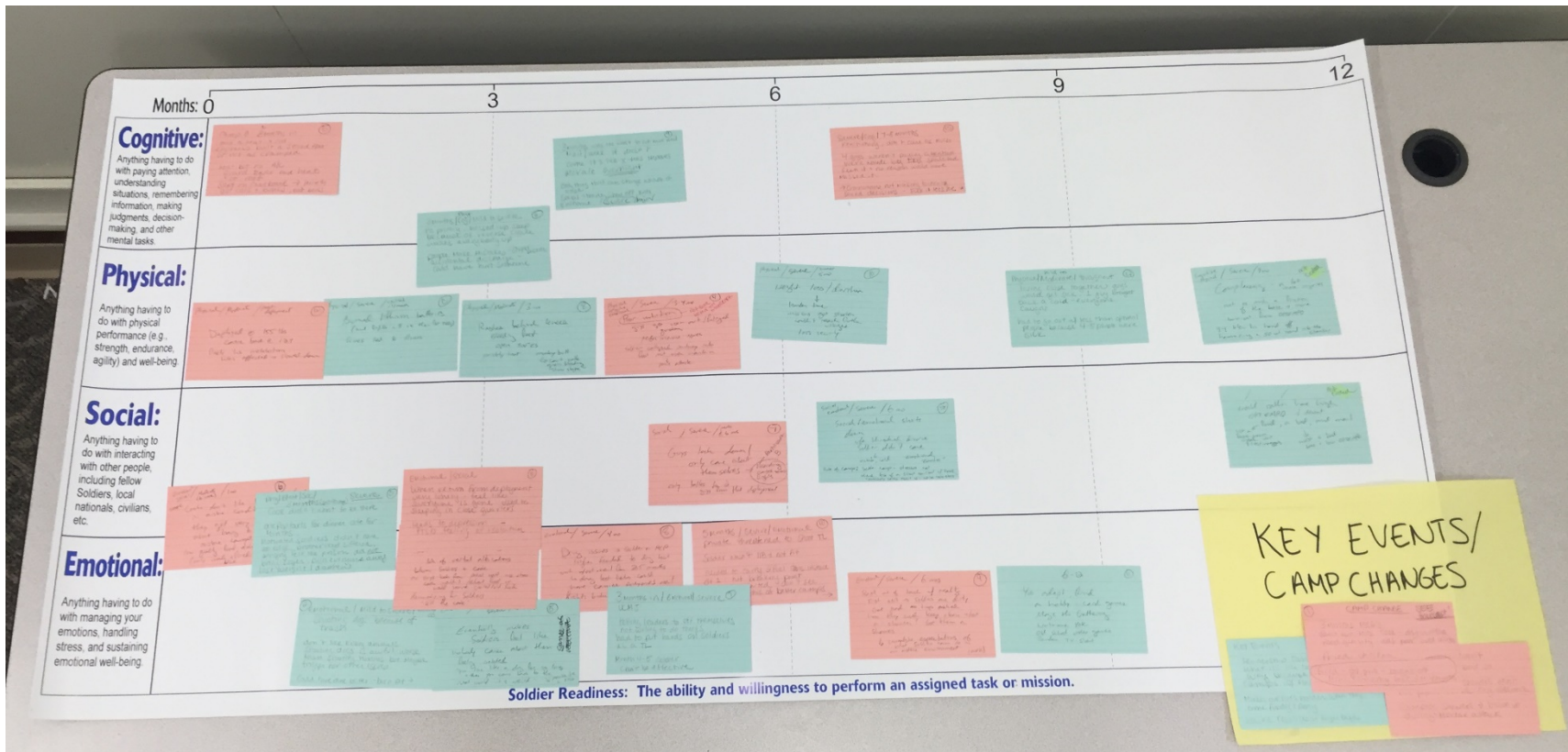
Procedure



Interviews were divided into two parts:

Part 2:

- Interviewers walked Soldiers through a 12-month deployment, asking them to recount impacts on readiness they had witnessed and how base camp conditions contributed to worsening or mitigating those impacts.
- Soldiers sorted impacts into cognitive, physical, social, and emotional categories and rated each impact as mild, moderate, or severe.
- If the duration of a Soldier's most recent deployment had been less than 12 months, he/she was asked to extrapolate based on his/her experience.



CPSE Timeline Template Used to Structure the Interviews

- Soldiers were interviewed in small groups and colored index cards were used to distinguish participants' comments.
- Some comments pertained to more than one readiness domain. Such overlaps were coded on the cards and indicated visually through placement on the template.
- Comments made in regard to key events or major camp changes were also captured.



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Analysis Approach



- Data were coded using standard qualitative data techniques.
- Three researchers independently coded the data and adjudicated any discrepancies.
- Main focus of the analysis was on identifying insights related to four base camp functional areas (field feeding, field hygiene, billeting, and MWR).
- In addition, coding revealed insights regarding leadership practices and how they can influence Soldier readiness.

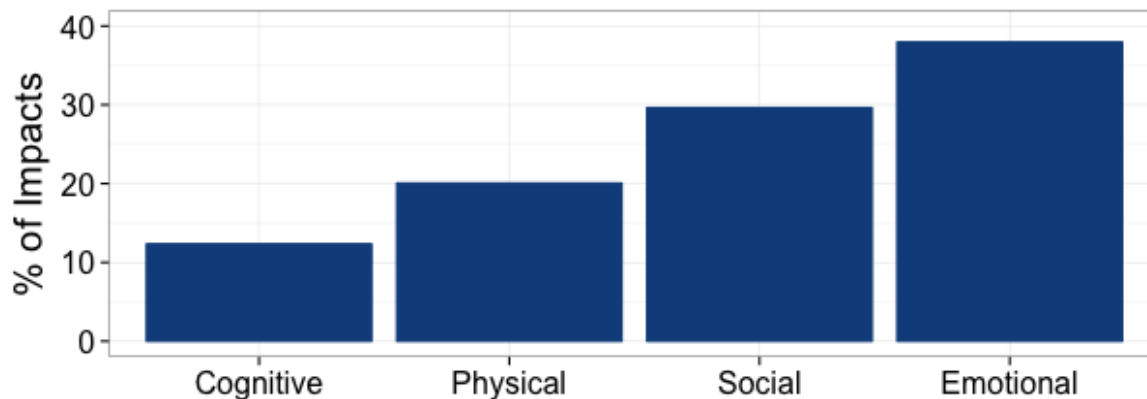


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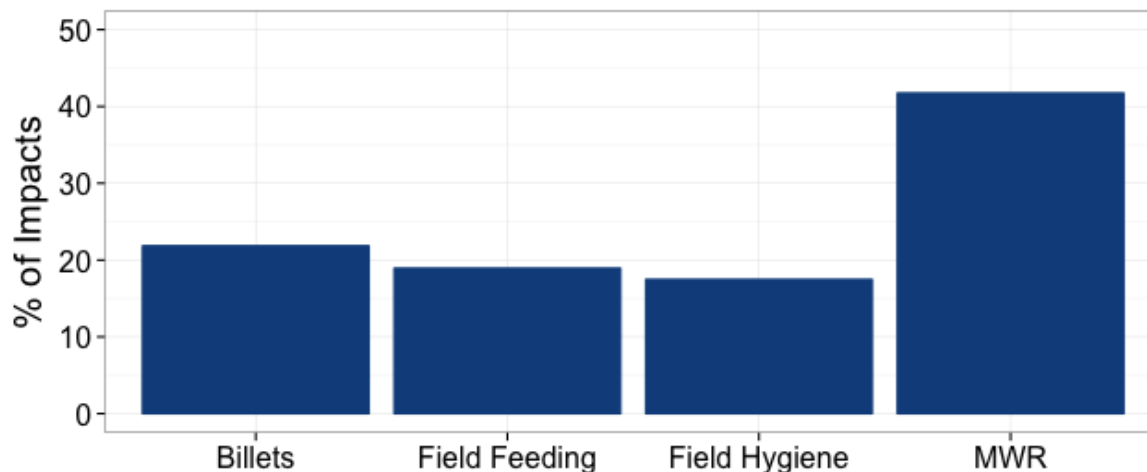


Results: Overview of Impacts

The majority of the impacts (37.96%) were emotional, followed by social (29.63%), then physical (20.06%), and cognitive (12.35%)



The majority of impacts on readiness were associated with MWR conditions, followed by billets, field feeding, and field hygiene.

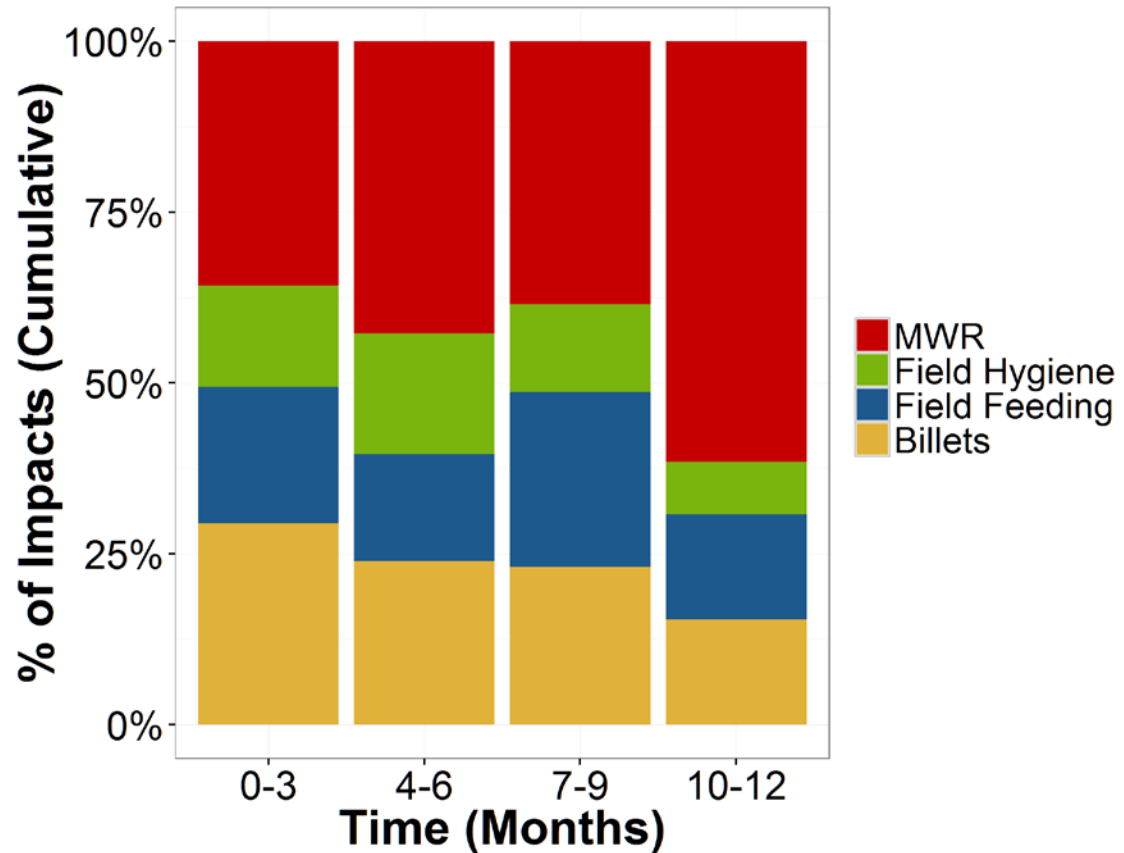




Overview of Impacts

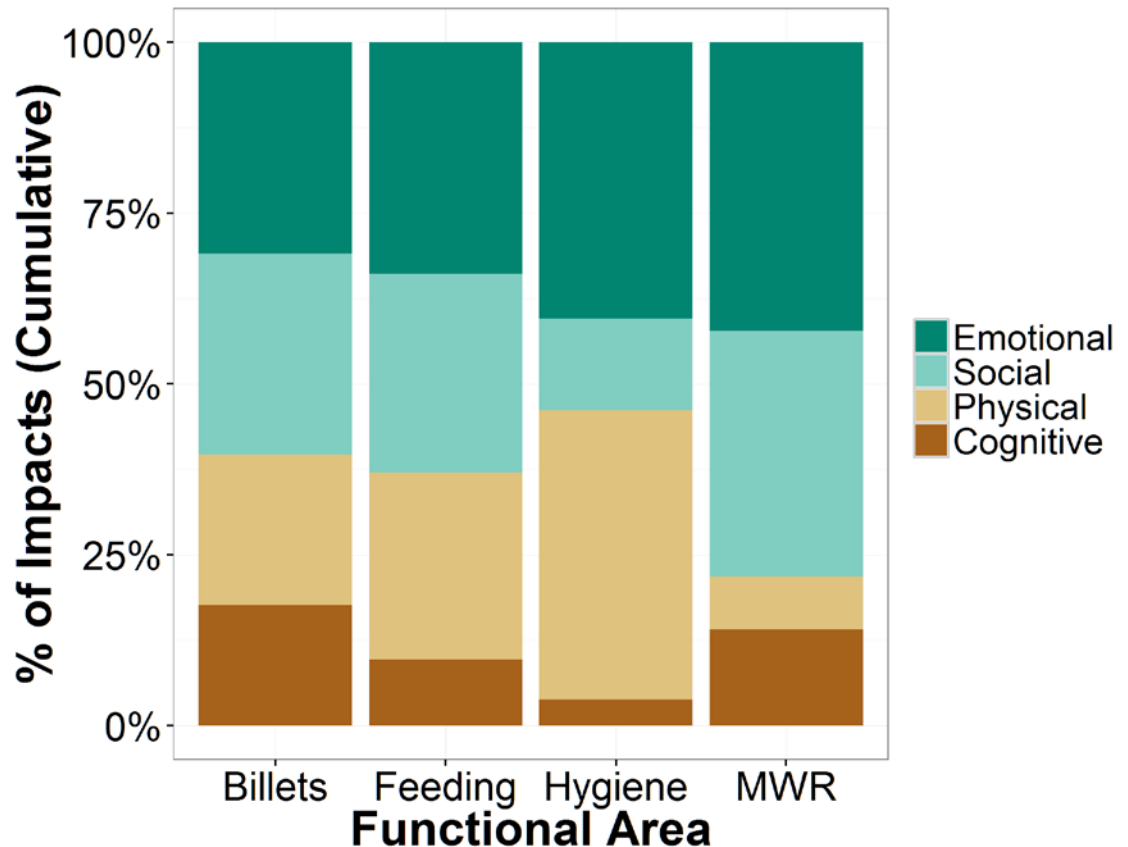


There was some indication that a lack of MWR was associated with more impacts toward the end of a deployment, though the effect was not statistically significant.



Overview of Impacts

- MWR was primarily associated with social and emotional impacts.
- Hygiene had the greatest share of physical impacts.
- Hygiene also had a large number of emotional impacts.
- Cognitive impacts were the least common across all functional areas.





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Results: Key Insights by Base Camp Functional Area



Key Insights by Base Camp Functional Area



The following slides drill into the key insights on CPSE readiness by base camp functional area.

Direct quotes from Soldier interviews are used to help describe how the conditions on the base camp impacted their readiness state.

Click on any of the following links to jump to the corresponding section:

- [MWR](#)
- [Billets](#)
- [Field Feeding](#)
- [Field Hygiene](#)

A link back to this slide is included at the end of each section.



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MWR Keeps Soldiers Connected



Top-Line: MWR

MWR facilities such as a gym, chapel, or computer rooms can be emotionally stabilizing for Soldiers by allowing them to connect with fellow Soldiers (when not on mission) and loved ones back home.

“The people that are very spiritual find that they get some relief by being around other people that are like them, so they sit there and talk about their religion with other people that are like them, and that’s another form of being back home – maybe back home they were very religious and into it and that helps them. The guys that go to the gym – maybe that’s something that just reminded them of being home and that relieves stress. And the MWR guys, they’re talking to someone back home, so I guess that’s their relief.”

“When guys went to the gym, they were not just in there lifting weights – they were listening to music and getting into groups and going.”

“Having an MWR facility is probably one of the key things. The availability to talk to home or have some place where they can kick back and relax helps facilitate that.”



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MWR Keeps Soldiers Connected



Insight: Connection

Soldiers look for ways to affiliate around common interests and form communities with fellow Soldiers that sustain morale and emotional stability.

“Around the 6-7 month mark, we would have fires every night. We had a [fire] pit...It was a huge morale booster – just smash up some pallets and have the fire. It’s social. It cleared people’s minds from everything else going on. Even if they’re having problems back home, we just got around the fire and talked and relaxed.”

“We made a movie night where somebody put their laptop out and threw in a movie – we made everybody sit there and watch it. Inside our living quarters, we built our own MWR. We built our own horseshoe pit, we had a smoke section for the guys that smoked, and we built a little box to play corn hole in.”

“If they don’t have their gym, they have pent up energy. They need their release. With the social aspect, now they’re not heading out to the gym with their battle buddy. And then they’d go, ‘well, I have guard in three hours. I would go to the gym this week, but that’s not happening so I’ll just stay in bed so I won’t even go outside and talk to anybody’.”



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MWR Keeps Soldiers Connected



Insight: Connection

There are important differences between video chat, phone calls, letters, and care packages. Soldiers use video chat and phone calls to catch up in real time with loved ones back home. Letters and care packages help reconnect Soldiers with home and the outside world.

“Letters are personal, but care packages bring back the world. You’re not in this nowhere land where no one cares about you and you’re just trying to live. You get a taste of life again. I remember getting Spaghetti-O’s in a care package my grandma sent me and it made everybody’s day because I shared with everybody. It was a big deal.”

“It was like you almost turn into something less than a human – some kind of a mixture between an animal and a person. Care packages bring you back to reality and make you feel like a person again.”

“...but those little packages they get really have an impact on their morale – when you get a package from mom or dad or your wife or pictures from your kids.”



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MWR Keeps Soldiers Connected



Insight: Connection

Not having the means to keep in contact with friends and family back home was a major concern for Soldiers. It is a source of anxiety and distraction that degrades readiness and can potentially impact a mission.

“[What do you see happening if you don’t have that contact?] Cognitive issues, people not being able to focus on their job because they’re worried. They’re withdrawn. So you have cognitive issues, people making bad choices, just mentally breaking down... You understand what your mission is and what your requirements are, but you’re not able to do them because mentally you’ve checked out. You cannot contribute to what your mission is because your mind is elsewhere – with what’s going on back home.”

“Parents want to know what their kids are doing. People want to talk to their husbands and wives. Amount necessary depends on person.... It’s going to have a big impact on morale. They won’t be paying attention to what they need to pay attention to.”

“Three months [without mail] maybe was the worst? And then it got to the point where they were sending e-mails to higher-ups like ‘hey, something is going on because we haven’t seen mail in three months.’ [How does that impact the Soldier?] That’s really the only thing I’ve seen change the attitude on the base.”



MWR Keeps Soldiers Connected



Insight: Connection

Soldiers need the ability to maintain a connection with the outside world (e.g. pop culture, holiday traditions). It provides a sense of normalcy and reminds Soldiers there is a world outside of the area of operation (AO).

“I think in a perfect world, the internet would be a lot better and that would’ve helped guys as well – to separate themselves from deployment while they were off for a couple hours. Like ‘oh, I’m going to check out YouTube.’ ...Facebook is one of those things where you can log on and you can see what’s going on the world and talk to your friends.”

“By the time Christmas rolled around, you had guys with ‘Death before Dishonor’ tattoos being like ‘can we put up a Christmas tree?’ That’s just, again, you’re escaping a reality here by providing something that reminds me of home.”

“We all want to be interacting with the world. We want to know what’s going on and what new songs came out. Having that escape makes things feel different instead of seeing the same things every day.”



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MWR Keeps Soldiers Connected



Insight: Decompression

For Soldiers, the value of exercise is decompression. It's a way to "blow off steam" and alleviate stress and pent-up aggression. Fitness is secondary; it's not what Soldiers view as the main value of having a gym.

"If you were to ask a fitness guy to look at what people did on a combat outpost gym and asked if it helped them, they would say physically in no way, shape, or form because you can't maintain the proper eating, you're way off. People do it because it's social, it blows off steam, it's a way to physically – people punch a bag – it helps people deal with stuff."

"The gym kept us occupied. Socially, you go there as a group – you work together. Emotional, it clears your mind. That's why we do PT every day. And physical, obviously you get physically stronger and able to withstand things. The gym was open 24/7, so anytime you wanted to go, you just go to the gym. That was a huge positive."

"If you take the gym away from them, you will see some pissed off people because that's their form of relaxation. That's the place they go to get away from whatever is bothering them and they get to relieve their stress."



MWR Keeps Soldiers Connected



Insight: Decompression

The primary function of video games, movies, and other media is not to provide entertainment. They enable Soldiers to relax, escape, and let go of frustrations from the mission.

“Unfortunately, most of the time, the internet was very slow and unreliable – but guys still had movies and stuff like that. The guys in my platoon didn’t really use the MWR because the FOB we were at, there were random civilians and interpreters in the MWR. There weren’t a lot of Soldiers that were there. I think watching movies helped a lot of guys too.”

“It might’ve been the XBox itself because it provides a distraction, but it also represents a link to not here. When you take that away – something that would be normal back home – you’re just leaving what could only exist in Afghanistan, and that messes with you just as well.”



Top-Line: Billets

Billets act as an oasis – providing rest and opportunities for Soldiers to reconnect with themselves. The ability of billets to serve as an oasis depends on group dynamics, cleanliness, comfort, and Soldiers' sense of privacy and control.

“For the most part, your bunk is your La-Z-Boy, your TV, your internet – that is your home.”

“...and the thing about that was, it was probably the worst deployment for me in terms of my life being in danger. We had constant IDF whether it was mortar or rockets and even to the threat where they had IRAMs [Improvised Rockets and Munitions]. It was pretty much like a flying IED. We lived kind of scared there, but because I could come to my room and just have my friend there, it was kind of calming.”

“You don’t need a TV. You barely need internet. Clean and space. Clean and space. I swear to God. You can keep people down range for 18-19 months if it’s clean and I have space.”



Insight: Group Dynamics

Mixing Soldiers on different work/rest cycles in communal billets without walls or other means of separation significantly affects sleep quality, which degrades performance. Noise and light from active Soldiers make it difficult for others to sleep.

“It messes up your sleep too because everyone’s on different schedules. You always have guys on guard and then missions, so you get four hours of sleep at night and they’re upset and throwing their kit around because they’re awake and it wakes everybody up.”

“...we all had our own light switches to the lights that were directly above our heads, you could want to go to sleep but somebody else who is not going to go to sleep had their lights on, so you don’t have that complete darkness in your room.”

“Somebody in my building or a lot of people would have guard duty – it would start at midnight every night. So midnight every night, the lights would go on and all these guys would be putting on all their gear and leaving the room.”



Insight: Group Dynamics

Mixing Soldiers with different ranks, standards of hygiene, and genders in billets that lack separation creates tension that can affect individual morale and team cohesion.

“They moved us to a building that males stayed in and when the SGM found out, he moved all the males out. It was like we had this whole top floor to ourselves, which put a strain on the guys because then they were like 2-3 to a small room. [Did that cause tensions with the males?] Oh yeah, because they were like ‘you all come here and you get all this space to yourselves.’”

“If you’re my NCO, but we’ve been bunking next to each other all day and we’re joking around, playing Xbox or whatnot, and then you tell me to do something or worse – I do something to get in trouble – how can you discipline me? Because it’s like, ‘hey, back in the hooch, we’re playing XBox together, come on man. You’re maverick and I’m goose,’ you know what I mean?”

“And if you have an open space – like, it’d piss me off because I’m not a clean freak, but I don’t want to lose my shit, and you have those privates that just got off mission and they’re dirty as hell and they’re just throwing their shit around and they’re chipping off dirt into my area.”



Insight: Cleanliness

Soldiers want a clean living environment. Lack of cleanliness wears Soldiers down emotionally. In particular, worn-out, dirty mattresses, odors, and bugs make it difficult for Soldiers to rest and recover.

“If that mattress had been slept on by 10,000 bodies, change it. Like, come on. There should be no reason that you look at a mattress and see the spring outlines. If you can see that, burn that thing.”

“Cleanliness:...those mattresses are nasty. With the compiled dust and dirt that’s just from day-to-day crap, people are sweating and sleeping with no sheets.”

“...if you had a standard tent that’s been staked down with sandbags on the sides and fleas are getting in there – biting flies and fleas get in there, so then you just have a person who’s all the way irritated now because his living arrangements are like ‘alright, I don’t have clean clothes, I have poor hygiene, and I have pests inside my living area.’”



Insight: Temperature, Humidity, and Comfort

Soldiers need billets to provide a break from the often extreme temperatures and humidity of an AO.

“If you don’t have heat or air conditioning, you don’t have that safe haven – that feeling when you walk back inside like ‘ah, it’s so nice in here’ or ‘ah, it’s nice and warm in here.’ It’s that thing that you look forward to when you get off the mission.”

“After you’ve been working for a little bit, you’re already tired and then you come back and you’re in the heat – it’s kind of like a sauna, and it’s just draining you even more. And then by the time you get out to do something else, you’re not motivated to do it. You don’t have any energy to do it. It just starts breaking you down to where you don’t care about anything anymore. You just don’t even want to be there and you’re complaining about everything. Some guys wouldn’t even go eat anymore. They just didn’t feel like getting up to go get something to eat.”

“You’re miserable. You’re sweating and you’re nasty and you’re hot all day and all night for however many days you’re out. Then you get back and you just want to relax, but you sit there and sweat more.”



Billets Act as an Oasis



Insight: Privacy and Control

Soldiers need privacy and space. The bed/sleeping space is often the only area on a camp that an individual Soldier can make his/her own. Lack of privacy and sense of control degrades social and emotional readiness.

“I’m in this room. You gave me that corner. That’s my corner. After a couple days, it’s not my corner anymore. You keep coming into my space whenever you want. Everything’s being dictated to me and now I’m having to share it, now I’m having to split it, now I have to hold other people’s stuff. If it’s my corner, I just want it to be my corner.”

“I would say once you get settled in, if you can have a place that is partitioned off to yourself, it’ll make a whole lot of difference because you can at least have a place to be like, ‘this is mine. I just want to hang out.’ It’s a mental dump. If you leave your door open or something, your buddies can come in and chit chat like ‘hey guys, I’m going to rack out’ and then you can be on your own.”

“It’d be an interesting social experiment to watch how people would create their own private space in the tent. If you were to walk in there, you’ll see people put up ponchos and poncho liners so you could create a room and I think that was a self-soothing kind of maneuver. A psychologist would find it very interesting – you’re creating a safe space where you can feel almost removed from the group for your own mental well-being.”



Top-Line: Field Feeding

Food is more than fuel. Food helps Soldiers sustain a positive emotional state, creates social connections that enhance unit morale and cohesion, and impacts physical health and performance.

“With no hot meals, no one looks forward to food anymore. They’re like, ‘damn, I have to eat.’”

“Even on a small place, if the food was good and you were not sleeping on the ground, if your OPTEMPO is high, that’s OK. As long as there’s a warm meal that somebody made for me...”

“Soldiers could absolutely go longer if they have good food.”

Food Is More Than Fuel



Insight: Variety

Lack of variety wears on Soldiers. Conversely, food can be an important way to break up the grind and monotony of a long deployment.

“On the big FOB they have restaurants to break up the monotony. On a big camp you can get steak or lobster, but on the small camp, you’re doing logistics runs so they aren’t spending money on food.”

“We were joking around that in 30 days we would trade a Soldier for a goat.”

“There’s nothing worse than coming back from an all day mission to Pop Tarts as your dinner. It happened all the time.”

“...we would get a food delivery and we would get those mini-pizzas. [It was good] just because it was different. If we got pizza every day we would be like, ‘oh, my God, no.’”



Insight: Comfort Foods

Providing familiar foods and beverages reminds Soldiers of the world outside the AO and can provide an important bump that sustains morale.

“I’m Hispanic, so comfort foods – our DFAC had like quesadillas and beans, stuff like that was comfort foods for me. It’s the little things...”

“You could have a BBQ right there. For us, what we started doing, they started grilling steaks for us. Then, just being able to grill out there, it gave them a merry old time.”

“Something as simple as getting energy drinks to Soldiers boosts morale. More laughing, they’ll be more awake, they get their mind into the game better.”

“The chow hall at Airborne had fiesta day. Taco Tuesday. Soul Food Friday. They had stuff like that to break up the monotony.”



Insight: Under-eating

Combat rations (MREs, UGR-Es) are not long-term solutions for keeping Soldiers well fed. After a few weeks, Soldiers begin skipping meals or only eating part of the ration. This affects morale and degrades physical readiness.

“We train with MREs...no one feels comforted with a MRE.”

“MREs get old very quickly. I chose to skip lunch because it was a MRE and it was cold and there was no point to that. I only ate two times a day [and] went from 200 pounds to 175.”

“If you’re eating UGR-E for the last 30 days...I think I had about two more weeks before I completely lost my mind.”

“Some guys would eat half of it [MRE] and that would take away from the endurance aspect. If we got into something out there, they might’ve made it through the fight and collapse afterward, just because they didn’t want to eat the food.”

“Most of our guys lost a lot of weight...people were choosing to just eat the Skittles and wheat snack bread with peanut butter [from MREs].”



Insight: Social Connection

Food is an important way for Soldiers to connect with each other, restore a sense of normalcy (e.g., by celebrating holidays), and connect with other cultures.

“One of the best meals was when the Afghans threw a party. They would bring in a goat and slaughter it and it would be fresh meat. Fresh vegetables. That was a special occasion.”

“We would give the cooks a break on Friday and Saturday. All they had to do was make sides and we would make surf and turf and all the platoon sergeants would grill.”

“I helped the cooks put together a Thanksgiving meal that was by far the best those guys had seen. Three turkeys, four hams, and all of them were different varieties. We had better support and unity within that COP. The Thanksgiving meal was the best outcome because it got the guys off the [negative] mind state.”



Insight: Social Connection

Soldiers will improvise and create their own food options to sustain morale and esprit de corps.

“My cook started making homemade pizza in an oven. He created a mud brick oven and made pizza and, out of nowhere, you’re like, ‘pizza’.”

“I might be at the observation posts and take a box of frozen turkey burgers and hope it would stay frozen. We had a little griddle that someone bought and someone left it up there permanently. You do what you gotta do. That’s what we used to cook and I became Chef Bob up there. We bought the little rolls and made turkey burger sliders and put soy sauce on them.”

“We were lucky that the village was right attached to the COP so we could send people to get fresh vegetables and fruits and flatbread.”



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Hygiene Helps Soldiers Feel Human



Top-Line: Field Hygiene

Hygiene sustains physical health, morale, and makes Soldiers feel “human.”

“The ability to go somewhere with running water is money. That thing will hit a reset button that you wouldn’t even understand.”

“...something like not being able to take showers for a few days is a big deal. When you’re wearing body armor, helmet, etc. you sweat and it doesn’t really get to release from your body. When you get back and want to de-stress, something like not being able to take a shower...”

“...when you feel disgusting and dirty it makes you feel worse and makes it suck more.”

“Being filthy segues to that apathetic feeling. You’re just stewing in your own filth.”



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Hygiene Helps Soldiers Feel Human



Insight: Morale

Clean clothes are important for sustaining morale. Wearing dirty clothes makes Soldiers feel less than human and erodes their spirit.

“...guys being emotional that they have to get up at 0300 to do laundry in the bucket because, ‘I’m down to one t-shirt’. You had the bucket and it [got clothes clean] better than nothing. You can only go so many days – it’s just too ripe.”

“...something like a broken washer is going to drive you nuts because now not only are you worrying about missions, you don’t have time to wash your clothes...so you’re fighting with Soldiers to do your laundry.”

“Having clean clothes is a big deal. When you figure out you’re going to be somewhere for nine months you don’t want to go a month without clean clothes.”



Insight: Morale

Showers are also important for morale. Cold showers are no good.

“I think not having running water was the hardest. Your mentality starts to deteriorate and you see no hope. So it’s like, maybe, tomorrow and it’s almost 200 degrees with your kit on. The sweat is uncomfortable, you don’t see hope.”

“...when the element went out in the latrines we would have to take cold showers occasionally. That was demoralizing, like, ‘I have to take a shower, but I don’t want to take one in super cold water.’ Some guys would just avoid showering at that point.”

“Losing the shower is a severe impact physically and socially...it’ll make people irritable.”

“...so when you come back to the camp and you want to destress and forget about what happened on the mission, something like not being able to take a shower can wear on you.”



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Hygiene Helps Soldiers Feel Human



Insight: Health

A proper shower (as opposed to baby wipes or a facecloth and bottled water) is absolutely essential for maintaining skin health. Rashes and infections can take a Soldier out of the fight.

“Our shower was broken. [We had] lots of skin problems. Rashes, staph infections. We can’t get a good shower [so] it just takes breaking the skin. [Now] it’s not just a rash, it’s a staph infection.”

“You can’t just focus on the skin and stuff. Once guys start getting trench foot [they] can’t go on patrol very long. Their feet are blistered up and they can’t clean it up. Having a shower forces you to wash your feet.”

“We didn’t have showers, we had baby wipes and stuff like that. Maybe around 4-6 months we had guys get MRSA infections.”



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Hygiene Helps Soldiers Feel Human



Insight: Health

Soldiers need reliable access to soap, shampoo, laundry detergent, toothpaste, and other hygiene supplies. These items are often not included in logistical resupply. Soldiers often rely on PX and care packages. Neither of those options are reliable.

“I think the only time I get hygiene stuff from the Army is when I go to the dentist and get a brush and a little toothpaste.”

“They’ll [PX] run out of soap. The soap thing is huge. Toothbrushes, deodorant, toothpaste runs out. If you run out you have to rely on other people.”

“...those care packages with soap, shampoos, and the basic necessities, that can be a big boost when you're out there sucking dust for a week. You can do without that for a while. But it becomes moderate [impact] when you run out of hygiene supplies because you start getting into people's health and welfare. If you can't stay clean, you can't stay healthy.”



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Results: Other Influencers of QoL (O) and Readiness



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Other Influencers of QoL (O) and Readiness



Top-Line: Other QoL Influencers

There is a distinct deployment cycle that Soldiers experience overseas. The timing of this cycle is influenced by individual differences, the cumulative impacts of poor QoL, unrealistic leadership expectations, and catastrophic events (death, injury).

“I think three months is when things really start to affect a Soldier...The routines start coming in and you almost get complacent because it’s the same cycle over and over.”

“You don’t realize how much small amenities can make a difference in how Soldiers act and how ready they are and how well they perform their job. It’s a cumulative effect. Something small like not having showers all the time by itself is not a big deal. But add the fact that you’re never getting good food and then you start to hear Soldiers complain instead of putting their mind on the mission and thinking about what they have to do.”

“The last 90 days of deployment...starts to get more dangerous for Soldiers physically. A lot of mistakes start getting made. They may not be paying attention as much as they should because they’ve been doing it so long and it’s second nature now.”

“Our biggest emotional toll came from casualties...we had to send nine people home, we had three KIA, and seven wounds that required people to go home. Because we’d be on a communications blackout, you couldn’t talk to family...that takes a toll because you have people dying who had wives, kids, or fiancées...that messes you up because the first thing you want to do is find solace in your own family.”



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Other Influencers of QoL (O) and Readiness



Insight: Individual Differences

A Soldier's upbringing and prior understanding of what it means to be deployed are indicators of what the Soldier's perception/rating of QoL will be while on a basecamp.

"I think it goes back to their upbringing and the quality of life you had prior to the military. A lot of officers come from that better life prior to the military. I think the male officers expect more than the enlisted males. Not that they struggle any differently, just because they're used to that better quality of life."

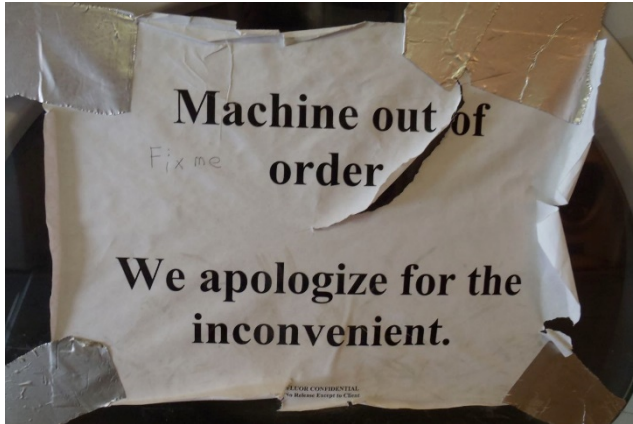
"I've had a couple guys who were homeless before they came in and they were pretty okay with sleeping in dirt. It didn't bother them too much...but some people don't want to give up the fact that it's just not going to be an enjoyable time...so they try to fight it the whole time and try to make their living situation as comfortable as it was back when they were in the states or back when they were in Germany and I think that lends itself to making them more miserable. No matter how hard they try to make it like home, it's not home."

"Generally, people who grew up watching military movies or playing shoot-em-up games think it's just the greatest lifestyle ever. They don't usually do too well because they think it's all kicking in doors and action. They don't realize that it's long periods of boredom sprinkled with moments of sheer terror."



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Other Influencers of QoL (O) and Readiness



Insight: Losing QoL Capabilities

Loss of a basecamp's QoL capabilities (e.g. DFAC, showers, HVAC) during a deployment negatively impact a Soldier's QoL more than if they were without the capabilities from the beginning of their deployment.

“Around that time [5 months] we had our generators go down and the main generator that supplied most of the power to the camp. It happened during the three coldest nights ever in my life. [J]ust that one generator alone was devastating for the camp, mentally. All of the Soldiers were emotionally down. There wasn't much excitement. There weren't a lot of the same activities we used to do... Now it was just try to stay warm or cuddle up by yourself or in the guard truck. Those three days, I couldn't understand why it took so long for something so important to get fixed. It took forever. Three days is a really long time for something that important.”

“We're trying to break everything down. We're trying to arrange everything and trying to get things sent out. We didn't have internet for the last three weeks. Then there were no more TVs and the food changed a little bit because they changed the kitchen...it was not prepped as well. Yeah, it made it worse...no good food, you can't even talk to your parents back home or your family back home. So everyone had enough of each other at that time too.”



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Other Influencers of QoL (O) and Readiness



Insight: Sense of Control

Soldiers desire a sense of control over their surroundings. Things that undermine this sense of control diminish the basecamp's ability to support readiness. For example, sharing a camp with host nation forces or incoming Soldiers can lead to tension and conflict.

"...when the next unit comes in to RIP with you, then all of a sudden there's a lot more people on the FOB... You get territorial. People start trying to sit in your office and sit in your chair. It's still my office. They're trying to enforce their own systems while you still have your own."

"The unit we replaced had different standards than our command had in place."

"I would say moderate because we're about to go home so it's whatever but it's frustrating. They need to make sure they properly move personnel out while new personnel are coming in...I would say definitely have enough barrack space for the TOA-not twice as much barrack space-but just so you have some wiggle room."

"The problem with working with a foreign Army is you can't speak the language so you have to use an interpreter. So it really gets annoying working with them sometimes... They don't pull security the way they're supposed to. They don't patrol the way they're supposed to."



Insight: Leadership

Leadership coming from larger FOBs can have a lack of understanding of a Soldier's experience on austere basecamps. This places unrealistic expectations on the Soldiers and results in Soldiers feeling that the leadership does not care about them.

"Our SGM at this period of time was out of touch with reality almost. He would come and visit us every three months and the first time...we were filthy, we were unshaved, and pretty nasty. So, he gets pretty upset like, 'hey, I understand we're in combat, but you guys can still maintain a better physical appearance than this.' We were like, 'how is that possible, because we don't have running water'?"

"That was a large contributing factor to the emotional issues people had and it was because there were these unrealistic expectations placed on us because the person making those expectations for us was coming from a place where he was essentially living in America, in Afghanistan."

"...all we saw was that our SGM, the guys that are supposed to supply and take care of us, don't give a crap about us. That had a psychological impact because it would be like if you were a child and your parents didn't take care of you."

"The big bases, it's like being at Fort Bliss...I don't think they [leadership] can understand what it's like because they've been there too long. They'll take their own helicopter and come in and walk through and be like 'fix this.' We have to do a little dog and pony show and shave. It just makes our life harder. They don't come out and help."



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Conclusions and Next Steps

- Billets
 - Poor billeting conditions create social friction that erodes cohesion and degrades sleep.
 - Focus for billets: Enabling Soldiers to keep their billets clean and providing privacy.
- Food
 - Food is an important hub for social connections that restore social and emotional readiness.
 - Focus for food: Variety, familiarity, and comfort foods.





Key Points by Functional Area



- Hygiene

- Important for health, but also critical for making Soldiers “feel human.”
- Focus for hygiene: Temperature-controlled showers with adequate supplies of soap, shampoo, and conditioner (for females) either through Army resupply or care packages; providing reliable access to laundry.



- MWR

- MWR is about reconnection and decompression. It is key for emotional stability.
- Focus for MWR: Gym, multiple options for connecting with home (phone, video chat, reliable mail, care packages).



- QoL (O) needs are not static. They vary over the course of a deployment. Therefore, how does camp QoL need to change in order to support Soldiers' changing needs?
- Soldiers need a sense of control over their living space. So much of a combat deployment is out of their control that the camp becomes a vital anchor. Key capabilities are 1) the ability to have personal space and keep it clean, and 2) the ability to have some control over billet temperature.





Leadership Considerations



- Soldiers are individuals, and personal history shades their views on what constitutes sufficient QoL (O).
- Losing something is worse than never having it at all. Leadership should pay special attention to ensuring that key QoL (O) capabilities are maintained and repaired or replaced quickly.
- Good camp conditions give Soldiers the sense that leadership cares about their well-being.
- Leadership can develop stronger unit cohesion through MWR-related capabilities. For example, Soldiers viewed having a place to congregate other than the billets as important, especially if this area included a “focal point” such as a fire pit.

“We had a feeling that everybody cared about us.
We were rock stars.”



Next Steps



- These data are driving the selection of attributes for a future quantitative survey of the link between QoL (O) and readiness. Results of that survey will be used to build an initial model of readiness similar to the QoL (O) model.
- Successful survey pilot has already been conducted with the 82nd Airborne.
- Data have also guided a white paper on potential experimental research using objective performance measures (e.g., sleep).

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